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ABSTRACT

The National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ) analyzed records in the Center's National Juvenile Court Data Archive to examine how the juvenile courts handled runaway cases. NCJJ examined 40,000 records of runaway cases processed between 1985 and 1986 in 611 jurisdictions from 12 states representing about one-quarter of the U.S. youth population at risk. The results of this analysis are presented in this document. Highlights include the findings that: (1) each year juvenile courts handled close to three runaway cases for every 1,000 youth aged 10 through 17 living in their jurisdictions; (2) girls, whites, and youth 14 through 16 years old were more likely than other youth to be referred to court for running away; (3) medium-size counties had higher runaway case rates than large or small counties; (4) overall, one in five runaway youth were admitted to secure detention facilities while their cases were being processed by the court; (5) law enforcement agencies referred the majority of runaway cases to court; (6) 4 out of 10 runaway cases referred to court were dismissed either at intake or after an adjudicatory hearing; and (7) states varied widely in the proportion of runaway cases handled formally, from less that 5% to 50% or more. Other sections of the report describe the study methodology, discuss the findings in more detail, and present figures that illustrate the findings graphically. (Author/NB)

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OJJDP Update on Statistics

ED 364 801

Robert W. Sweet, Jr., Administrator **November 1990**

Runaways in Juvenile Courts

by Melissa Sickmund

The problem of runaway youth has become an increasing public concern. Runaways are often vulnerable to exploitation, resulting in their victimization. Some become involved in drugs, prostitution, and other crimes. Communities have traditionally depended on social services and the justice system to respond to this problem. Although not all runaways end up in juvenile court, the court does have the opportunity to intervene in a large number of these runaways' lives.

How do our juvenile courts handle runaway cases? At the request of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), the National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ) conducted an analysis of more than 40,000 records in the National Juvenile Court Data Archive describing runaway cases processed between 1985 and 1986. The analysis included 611 jurisdictions from 12 States. These jurisdictions represented 26 percent of the U.S. youth population at risk. The analysis revealed that:

- Each year juvenile courts handled close to three runaway cases for every 1,000 youth aged 10 through 17 living in their jurisdictions.
- Girls, whites, and youth 14 through 16 years old were more likely than other youth to be referred to court for running away.
- Medium-size counties had higher runaway case rates than large or small counties.
- Overall, one in five runaway youth were admitted to secure detention facilities while their cases were being processed by the court. The proportion of runaways detained varied substantially, ranging from 11 percent in one State to more than 60 percent in another.

From the Administrator

Of all the youth at risk, runaways pose one of the most serious dilemmas for the juvenile justice system. Although not all runaways come to the attention of the system, juvenile justice professionals are responsible for protecting and intervening on their behalf. As the risks for victimization, illegal drug use, and delinquency continue to rise for runaway youth, the need remains crucial for the juvenile justice system to play its part in ensuring their safety.

Improvements in the way runaway cases are handled in juvenile courts can have lasting effects on many of our young people. A key step in making such improvements is to understand how the juvenile justice system is currently handling runaway youth. To that end, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) asked the National Center for Juvenile Justice (NCJJ) to analyze the records in the Center's National Juvenile Court Data Archive to provide this information.

The number of young people who run away from home each year can only be estimated. This is also the case with respect to the number that are referred to juvenile court. However, the data available to the Archive contain useful demographic information about youth who run away, in addition to providing details about the processing of the cases.

NCJJ examined 40,000 records of runaway cases processed between 1985 and 1986 in 611 jurisdictions representing about a quarter of the U.S. youth population at risk. The results of NCJJ's analysis are presented in this *OJJDP Update* and should prove useful to all those who are concerned with runaway youth, especially juvenile court administrators and persons who provide services to these youth, either in conjunction with court dispositions or as part of child protective services.

Robert W. Sweet, Jr.
Administrator

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Methods

This report is based on an analysis of automated case-level data for calendar years 1985 and 1986. Data were provided to the National Juvenile Court Data Archive by State and county agencies responsible for collecting or reporting information on case processing for youth referred to courts with juvenile jurisdiction.

County jurisdictions were selected for this study if (1) the upper age of juvenile court jurisdiction was 17, (2) the data represented the complete reporting of both petitioned and nonpetitioned runaway cases handled in the jurisdiction; and (3) the data distinguished runaway cases from other types of cases. Data from 611 jurisdictions in 12 States (Alabama, Arizona, California, Florida, Hawaii, Maryland, Mississippi, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Virginia) met these criteria. These jurisdictions are somewhat overrepresentative of larger counties compared to the Nation as a whole, and they have a slightly larger proportion of nonwhite youth.

Not all jurisdictions provided information on source of referral and use of secure detention. Florida, South Dakota, and Utah were excluded from analyses on source of referral, leaving 505 jurisdictions in nine States. Hawaii, Maryland, and Utah were excluded from analyses involving the use of secure detention, leaving 554 jurisdictions in nine States.

Cases were identified as runaway cases based on their most serious offense. Similarly, case disposition information was based on the most severe disposition if more than one disposition was ordered.

- Law enforcement agencies referred the majority of runaway cases to court.
- Four out of 10 runaway cases referred to court were dismissed either at intake or after an adjudicatory hearing.
- States varied widely in the proportion of runaway cases handled formally—from less than 5 percent to 50 percent or more.

An estimated 74,000 runaway cases were referred to U.S. juvenile courts in 1986. Previous analyses of archive data found that 20 percent of runaways referred to juvenile court were later returned to court for running away again. Many other runaway youth never come to the attention of the juvenile justice system. Because of this, the referral rate to juvenile court may represent only a small fraction of the runaway problem. The findings from this study reflect only those youth who were referred to juvenile court for running away.

Demographic differences in runaway case rates

Juvenile courts received runaway cases at an annual rate of nearly three cases for every 1,000 youth aged 10 through 17 living in their jurisdictions (figure 1). Annual runaway case rates varied greatly by age, sex, and race. The runaway case rate increased through age 15 and then dropped off. The rate for 15-year-olds (nearly 6 cases per 1,000 youth) was more than double the rate for 13-year-olds and nearly 6 times the rate for 12-year-olds.

Girls were more likely to be referred to juvenile court for running away than boys in all but the youngest age groups. For example, 14- and 15-year-old girls were more than twice as likely to be referred to court for running away as boys of those ages.

In general, white runaway youth were more likely to be referred to juvenile court than nonwhite youth. For every 1,000 white youth in the population, three runaway cases were referred, while among nonwhite youth the figure was two cases per 1,000. The difference between white and nonwhite youths' rates was greater among girls than among boys. The rate for white boys was 30 percent higher than the rate for nonwhite boys; among girls the rate was 46 percent higher for white than for nonwhite youth. White girls had the highest annual runaway rates, followed by nonwhite girls and then white boys. Nonwhite boys had the lowest rates. The annual runaway case rate for white girls was more than double the rate for nonwhite boys. Fifteen-year-old white girls had the highest annual runaway case rate of any group (eight cases per 1,000 youth).

Annual runaway case rates vary by county size and State

Medium-size counties had higher annual runaway case rates than either large or small counties (figure 2). The rate in medium-size counties was 35 percent higher than the small county rate and 98 percent higher than the large county rate. The pattern of rate differences across race and sex groups was the same regardless of county size.

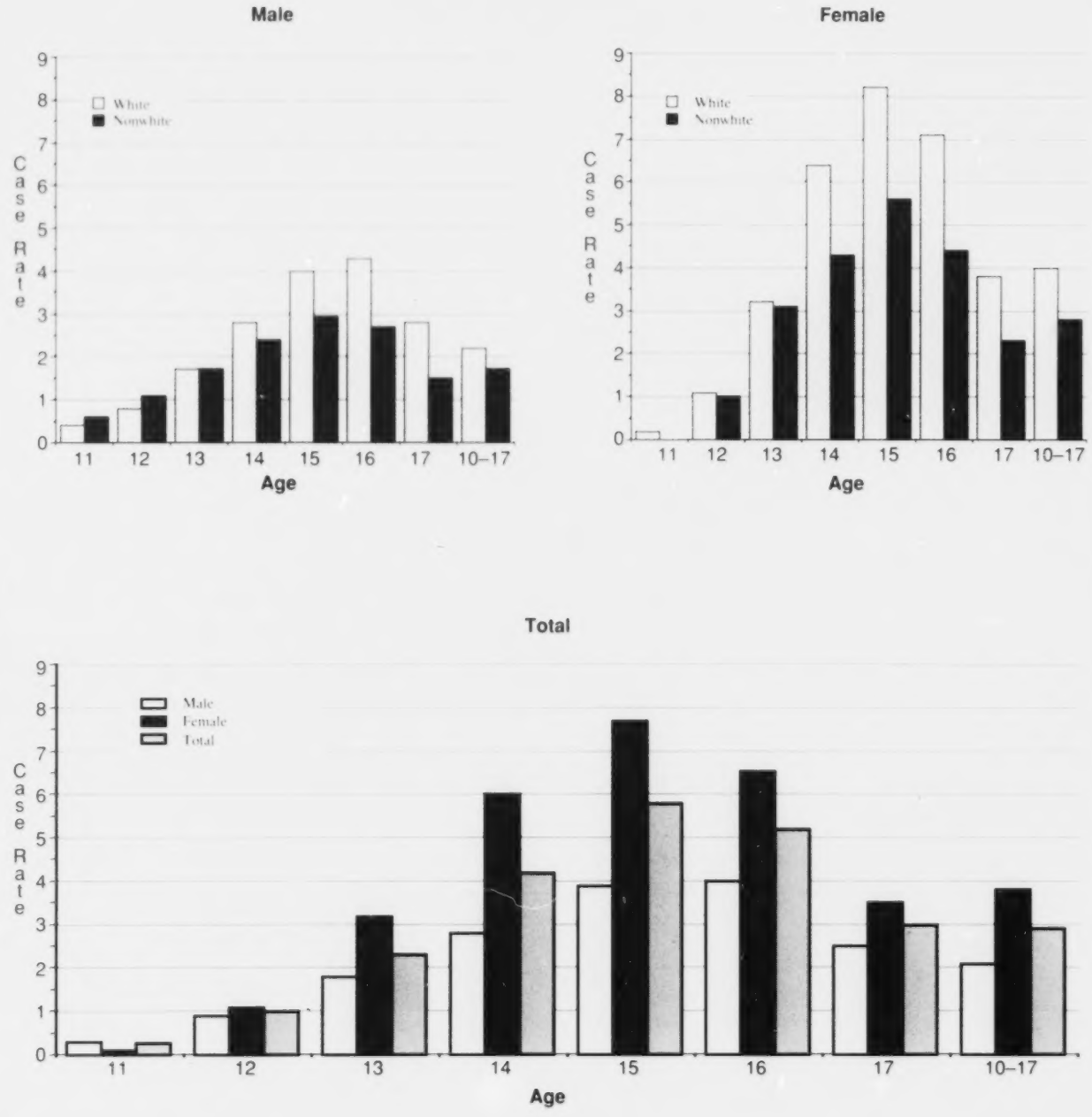
The majority of States included in the analysis had annual runaway case rates between 2 and 5 per 1,000 youth in their populations. However, State rates ranged from less than one case per 1,000 youth to nearly eight cases per 1,000 youth.

Source of referral

In jurisdictions reporting source-of-referral information, the analysis showed that 65 percent of runaway cases were referred to juvenile court by law enforcement agencies (figure 3). Relatives were the second most common referral source at 26 percent. States varied substantially in the proportion of referrals by law enforcement agencies or by relatives. The percentage of cases referred by law enforcement agencies ranged from 29 to 99 percent. In most

Figure 1

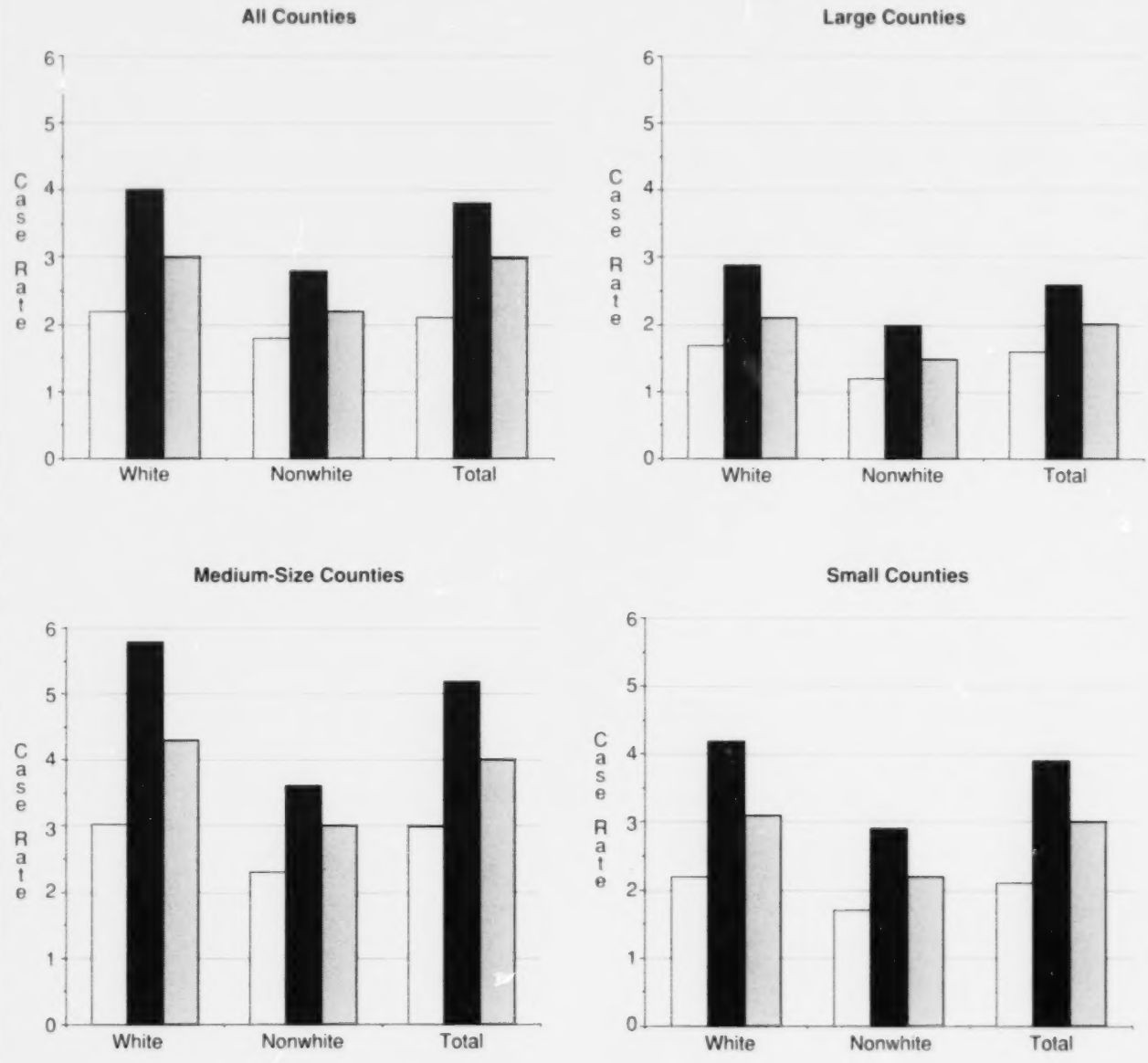
Runaway Case Rates



Note: Case rate is defined as the number of cases per 1,000 youth in each group.

Figure 2

Runaway Case Rates for Counties of Different Sizes



Large Counties—100,000 or more youth aged 10–17
Medium-Size Counties—40,000–99,999 youth aged 10–17
Small Counties—Fewer than 40,000 youth aged 10–17

Note: Case rate is defined as the number of cases per 1,000 youth in each group.

States, 90 percent or more of runaway cases were referred by law enforcement agencies. Referrals by relatives ranged from less than 1 percent to 58 percent, with most States reporting between 2 and 10 percent. Runaway cases were more likely to be referred by law enforcement agencies in large counties than in smaller ones. Small counties had the highest percentage of referrals by relatives.

Juvenile court processing

One of the first decisions to be made once a runaway case is referred to juvenile court is whether the case will be handled informally or formally (petitioned). Informal cases are handled at the intake level without an adjudicatory hearing. Many of these cases are dismissed, but others may result in referral to another agency, informal probation, payment of fines or restitution, or voluntary placement outside the home.

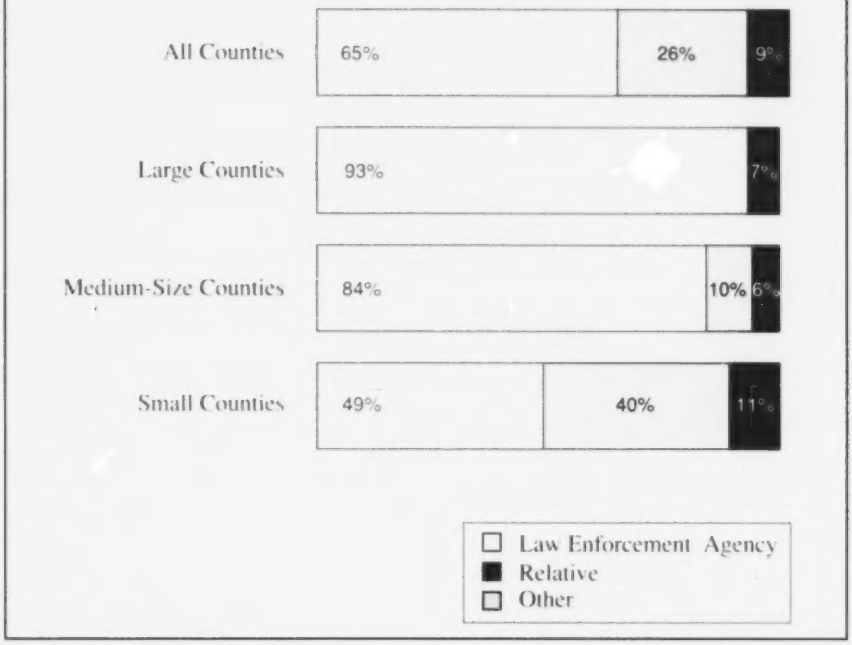
In formal cases a petition is filed and an adjudicatory hearing is scheduled. At the hearing, the case can be dismissed or the youth otherwise released, or the youth can be adjudicated. Following the adjudication decision, the judge may commit the youth to an institution, group or foster home, or other residential placement facility; place the youth on formal probation; refer the case to another agency or treatment program; or order the youth to pay fines or restitution.

Detention

The 1974 Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act states that "juveniles who are charged with or have committed [status] offenses that would not be criminal if committed by an adult or offenses which do not constitute violations of valid court orders . . . shall not be placed in secure detention facilities. . . ." Despite this prohibition, one out of five runaway cases in jurisdictions reporting detention information involved secure detention of the youth at some point between referral to court and disposition. Runaways are more apt to be securely detained than other types of status offenders. For example, earlier analyses of archive data showed that only 8 percent of ungovernable cases and 3 percent of truancy cases were detained.

Figure 3

Source of Referral of Runaway Cases



The present analysis found that the likelihood of a runaway case involving detention varied little with age, sex, race, or county size. There was wide variation in the percent of runaway cases involving secure detention. The proportion of cases detained ranged from 11 percent in one State to just over 60 percent in another. However, most States detained between 15 and 30 percent of runaway cases.

Court processing of runaway cases

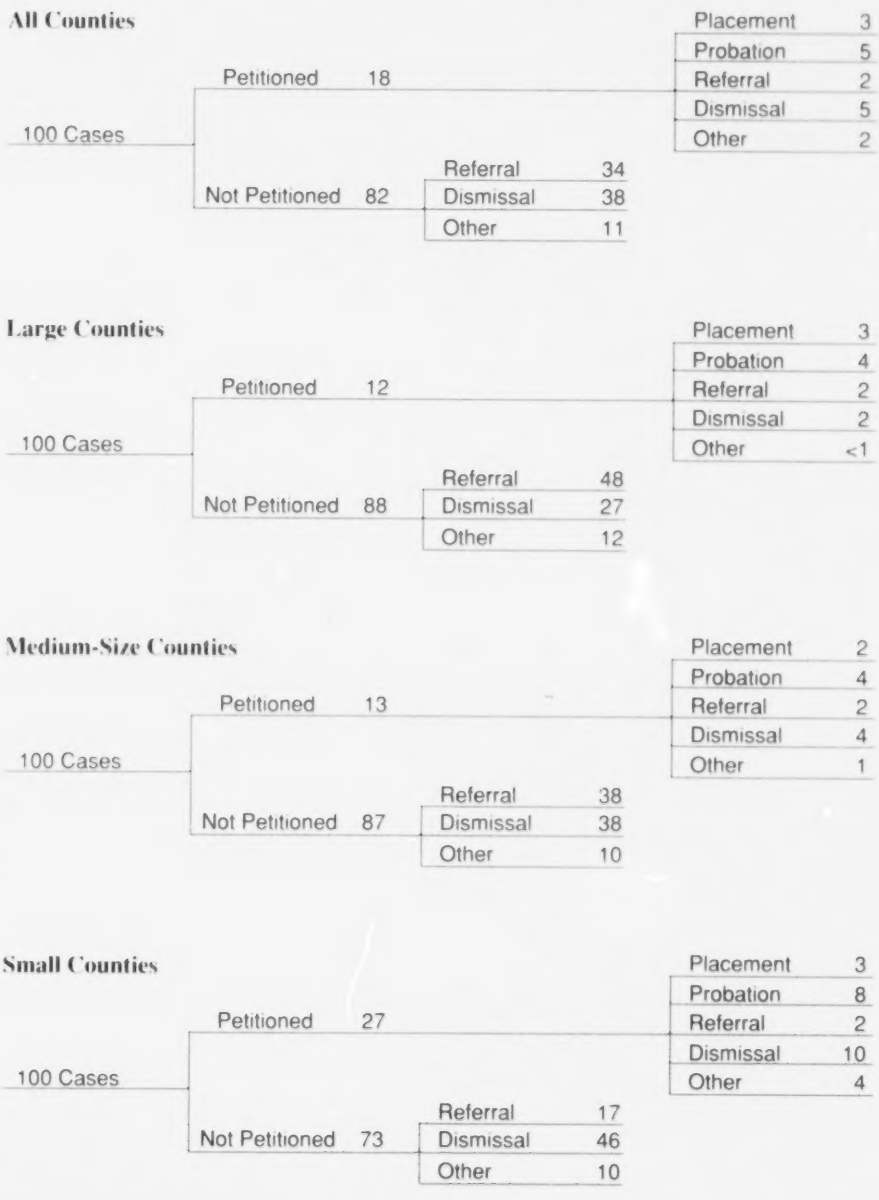
Courts in this study handled 8 out of 10 runaway cases informally. Nearly three-quarters of runaway cases were dismissed at intake or were referred to juvenile court in another jurisdiction or to other agencies for service (figure 4). A smaller proportion received some other informal disposition—typically informal probation. Fewer than 10 percent of runaway cases received a formal disposition of residential placement or formal probation.

Small counties were more likely to handle runaway cases formally than medium-size and large counties. In small counties, informally handled cases were most likely to be dismissed. Large and medium-size counties referred a significant proportion of their informal cases to other agencies. These data may reflect differences in the availability of services for runaways in counties of different sizes.

States varied widely in the percent of cases petitioned. While figures ranged from less than 5 percent in one State to 50 percent or more in others, most States petitioned between 7 and 18 percent of

Figure 4

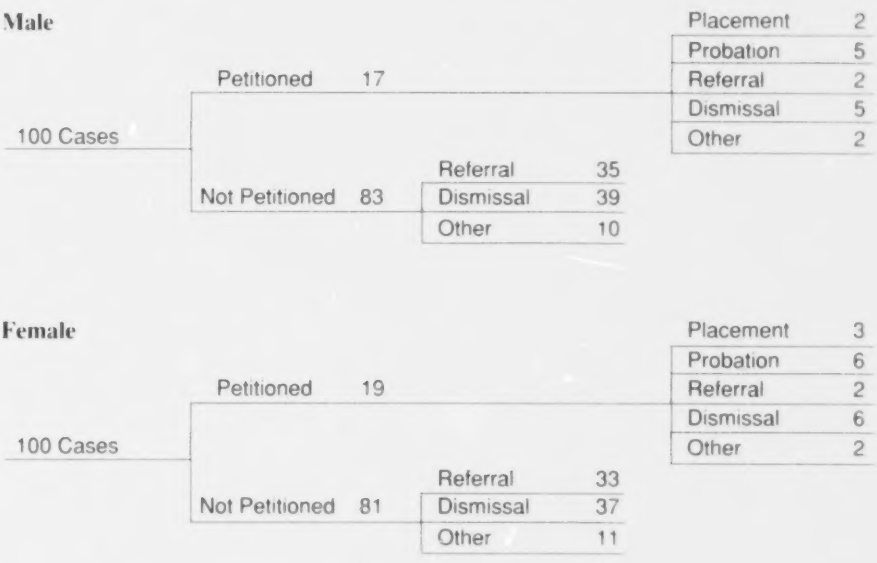
Processing of 100 Typical Runaway Cases in Counties of Different Sizes



Note: Detail may not add to totals because of rounding.

Figure 5

Processing of 100 Typical Runaway Cases by Sex



Note: Detail may not add to totals because of rounding.

their runaway cases. The use of formal probation ranged from 1 to 21 percent. Referral of informal cases to other juvenile courts or agencies ranged from less than 1 percent to more than 70 percent; most States referred between 6 and 21 percent of runaway cases. Most States dismissed one-third or more of their runaway cases without petitioning them. The largest percentage dismissed without petition was 87 percent, the smallest was 3 percent.

There were no significant differences between the processing of boys' and girls' runaway cases (figure 5). Cases involving girls were only slightly more likely to be petitioned and slightly less likely to be referred to another agency or dismissed at intake than cases involving boys.

Acknowledgments

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Richard Sutton is the OJJDP Program Manager for the Archive. D. Elen Grigg, OJJDP Publications Coordinator, edited the report and coordinated its publication. Nancy Tierney at NCJJ was responsible for report production, and the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse prepared the graphic design. Data processing was performed by Terrence Finnegan. Ellen Nimick supervised the data collection.

NCJJ gratefully acknowledges the cooperation of the many State and local agencies that contribute their data to the Archive. Their patience with our requests for data and documentation made this work possible.

For more information

The National Juvenile Court Data Archive collects and stores automated records of cases handled by courts with juvenile jurisdiction in more than 1,300 counties nationwide. For more information about the Archive, contact the National Center for Juvenile Justice, 701 Forbes Avenue, Pittsburgh, PA 15219, or call 412–227–6950.

NCJJ uses Archive data to prepare *Juvenile Court Statistics*, an annual report that provides national estimates of delinquency and status offense cases handled by juvenile courts. Archive data are available to researchers and policymakers.

For further information on runaways or a copy of the latest *Juvenile Court Statistics* report, call or write the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, Box 6000, Rockville, MD 20850 (800–638–8736; in Maryland and the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area 301–251–5500).

The Assistant Attorney General, Office of Justice Programs, coordinates the activities of the following program Offices and Bureaus: the Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Institute of Justice, Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, and the Office for Victims of Crime.

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